

by badly-knitted

Easter Alien Hunt

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****Rating:**** PG

****Spoilers:**** Nada.

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****Disclaimer:**** I don't own Torchwood, or the characters. They belong to the BBC.

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Rift retrievals didn't always go to plan, especially if what had come through was a living creature. Anything with legs or some other means of getting about could be relied on to wander off before Torchwood got there, which meant it then had to be tracked before it could be captured.

While the signature of the energy traces such a creature would pick up on its trip through the Rift were distinctive enough to be easily identifiable with Torchwood's scanning technology, that didn't necessarily mean finding new arrivals was easy. Large or aggressive creatures tended to draw a lot of attention to themselves, but if it was something small and shy it could be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

All Tosh could tell from her readings was that they were looking for a single creature about the size of a smallish cat. It wasn't much to go on since whatever it was could have gone in any direction from its point of arrival in a rundown area on the outskirts of Splott. Nevertheless, by fanning out with their scanners at the ready, and after following several trails that looped back on themselves as their quarry apparently ran around in circles to start with, they finally found a trail that seemed to be leading somewhere.

One of the biggest drawbacks of following something small was that it could go places they couldn't; under fences, through hedges, along the narrow space between a shed and a six foot high wall. Every time the team reached such an obstacle, they had to go around it and try to pick up the trail on the other side.

They'd been following this particular creature for over an hour, and as they had no way of knowing how far ahead of them it was, they couldn't even be sure whether they were gaining on it or falling further behind.

"We'll give this another hour," Jack decided. "If we haven't caught up with it by then, we might have to wait and see if it makes its presence known some other way."

"What, like by attacking someone?" asked Owen, looking less than happy at that idea.

"It's been travelling through a built-up area since it arrived and there have been no reports of anything strange being seen, never mind any attacks. It's probably just scared and confused so it's hiding. There's been no indication that it might be hostile," Jack reminded the medic.

"Maybe so, but it could be toxic to humans, or venomous. I don't like the idea of leaving it out here. Even relatively harmless creatures can be dangerous when they're scared."

"I know, and I don't like it any more than you do, but we can't spend all our time looking for one small animal when we have other things to deal with. Another hour and we call it a day, okay?"

The others nodded agreement, albeit with a certain amount of reluctance.

"Right, let's press on." Jack led the way at a jog along the alley behind a row of terraced houses, and fifteen minutes later they

stopped on the edge of a patch of rubble-strewn wasteland outside a large but shabby building, which might once have been a row of garages but seemed to have been turned into something more like a barn. It smelled strongly of animals. There were several open windows, through one of which the creature they were following seemed to have gained entrance.

"Now what?" Owen asked. "I'm not climbin' through there!"

"Hopefully that won't be necessary," Ianto said, looking down at his own suit and imagining the damage to it that method of entry would no doubt cause. "There has to be a door somewhere."

"Round here!" Tosh called from the other side of the building, and the rest of the team trooped around to join her. "It's locked though."

Ianto examined the heavy padlock. "No problem; most padlocks are easy." Pulling out a set of lock picks, he bent to work and a couple of minutes later, the lock clicked open.

"Alright, people, when we get inside, spread out and block access to the open windows. Then we'll advance through the interior and see if we can flush our friend out."

"Assuming it's still in there," Ianto added.

"Assuming that, yes. Last one in shuts the door. Don't want it escaping out that way."

It was an unseasonably hot day, without so much as a breeze to cool them, so everyone was already feeling hot and sweaty. The air in the building was close and stuffy, as well as smelly. The doorway opened onto a short pathway, to each side of which were large pens. At the end of the path was a wider one leading to left and right, running the length of the building and with more pens on each side.

The only light came through the windows, the majority of which were merely dirty panes of glass set high up in the walls and not designed to be opened. The only open ones were those down the far end and they were doing little to air out the inside of the large shed.

"We'll start at the window end. See if you can close them while we search," Jack instructed.

"Are you out or your tiny mind?" Owen asked. "We'll suffocate! What is that stench?" He had an arm up covering his nose and mouth.

"The smell of the barnyard," Ianto smirked, drawing a deep breath and coughing. "A bit pungent. Not a good environment for livestock either; nothing should be kept in these conditions. Soon as we find what we're looking for I'll alert the RSPCA."

Team Torchwood spread out, compromising by pulling the windows mostly shut, leaving gaps too small for a cat-sized creature to get through but still allowing a bit of air to get in. Searching, however, required entering the pens, from which came the rustling sounds of as yet unseen animals. Jack climbed over the nearest partition cautiously while the rest of his team waited on the path, unwilling to follow suit until they knew what they would encounter. Their eyes

had yet to adjust to the dimness after the bright sunlight outside.

"Ow!" Jack yelled as something nipped painfully at his leg.

"You alright, Jack?" Ianto peered at him through the gloom, making out vague shapes moving around Jack's feet. "What've you got there? We probably should've brought torches."

"I'm fine; slightly perforated, but otherwise intact. There's nothing here but a bunch of bad-tempered rabbits with sharp teeth."

"You'd be bad-tempered too if you were cooped up in here," Owen griped. "Place is like an oven!"

"Ah, that explains everything," Ianto sniggered, leaning on the partition with a wide grin on his face. "They're not rabbits, they're hot, cross, bunnies! What else would you expect at Easter?"

Gwen gave an undignified snort of laughter and Tosh got the giggles.

"Nice one, Teaboy!" Owen smirked.

Jack shook his head, trying not to laugh. "Are you lot going to help or do I have to check all these pens myself?"

"I think I can handle a few bunnies," Gwen decided, scrambling into the pen next to Jack's. "Hello there, sweetie!" She bent down to stroke a rabbit and got her hand nipped. "Ouch! They're not very friendly!"

"Probably not been handled much, my guess is they're being bred for fur or something." Ianto's expression turned hard. "Not for long though." He climbed into the pen across from Jack's. "Oh! Not just rabbits then. Got guinea pigs here!" He scooped up a small bundle of fluff, stroking it as he scanned the set-up. "At least they've got plenty of food and water, and the pens aren't overcrowded. It's not good, but it could be a lot worse."

Tosh climbed into the pen beside Ianto's as Jack left his and moved down the row to the next unchecked enclosure. Owen was still standing on the path.

"Owen? Care to assist?"

"No way! I don't do small animals."

"What about your rats?" Ianto sounded amused.

"That's different, they're tame and they don't bite. Besides, someone should stay out here to grab the alien if you flush it out."

"He has a point," Tosh said. "Climbing these partitions isn't easy, by the time one of us managed to get out it might have disappeared again."

"Fine," Jack sighed. "Just keep watch and yell if you see anything that might be what we're after."

They got right to the end of the row of pens, farthest from the windows, before Ianto called out, "I've got it!"

"Are you sure?" Jack called from the other side of the shed.

"It's blue with pink spots and has ten legs," Ianto replied. "If that's not an alien I'll eat my hat."

"You don't wear a hat," Jack teased.

"Well, not in this weather, I'd cook my brains."

Owen deployed the carrier Ianto had brought with them and the creature was carefully shooed inside to be taken back to the Hub.

"Right, mission complete!" Jack said with satisfaction. "Let's get this little guy back to the Hub and try to figure out what it is!"

"You lot head out; I'll catch up, I just want to open the windows again first," Ianto said, starting back down the shed.

"Don't take too long."

"I won't."

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Ianto caught up with the rest of the team when they were halfway back to where they'd left the SUV, and fell in beside Jack. He had his phone pressed to his ear. "Yes, that's right. There are pens full of rabbits and guinea pigs inside, looks like some sort of breeding farm, but the building isn't suitable for so many animals, they have almost no light or fresh air, and the place stinks. It's not right." He listened for a moment. "No, I don't know who owns the building but I'll see what I can find out." Another pause. "Yes, thank you. I'll be in touch."

"Everything alright?" Jack asked.

"It will be. The RSPCA is going to send someone out right away because of the heat. Tosh, can you run a check, see if you can find out who owns the building?"

"I'll get on it as soon as we get to the SUV," she promised.

"Good, thank you."

"No more hot, cross, bunnies?" asked Gwen.

"Hopefully not."

Reaching the SUV, they threw open all the doors and Jack started the engine, turning the air conditioning on full to cool the inside. The black vehicle had been sitting out in the sunshine for over two hours

and had soaked up the heat so that it felt even hotter than the interior of the shed, although a lot less humid. Once it had cooled down a bit, they piled in and as they pulled away from the kerb, Jack frowned.

"Ianto, is your jacket squeaking?"

Ianto blushed faintly and dipped a hand into his pocket, pulling out the small, spiky black guinea pig he'd picked up in the shed. "I couldn't leave him there, Jack. He looks just like you first thing in the morning. I think I'll call him Spike." He set the guinea pig on his lap where it nestled contentedly.

Jack glanced in the rear-view mirror. "How many more stowaways do we have?"

Both Tosh and Gwen looked sheepish, producing two more guinea pigs from inside their shirts, one white with brown speckles, the other patched in tan, black and white.

"You do know that's theft, don't you?" Owen asked. "They're someone else's property."

"There were hundreds, it's not like the owner will notice a few missing. Anyway, the RSPCA will be closing that place down and re-homing all the animals. We just saved them a bit of trouble," Gwen said firmly.

"You lot are nutters," Owen grumbled, shaking his head. "You're just makin' more work for yourselves."

"Says the man with the rats." Ianto glanced pointedly into the back seat at Owen.

"They're lab rats!"

"Lab rats would imply that you use them for tests, and the last time you tested anything on any of them was that invisibility ray six months ago when you freaked out thinking you'd lost Frank."

"I did not freak out!" Owen insisted. "I was just worried he might get stepped on, being invisible. Anyway, the invisibility wore off after a week."

"Good thing too, you hardly dared open his cage until you could see him again."

"When we get back to the Hub," Jack interrupted, "we'll need something to put our new pets in. Ianto, can you fetch some plastic storage containers from the archives? They'll do as temporary accommodation while we go shopping for supplies."

"Three storage containers. Right."

"Um, better make that four." Jack kept his eyes fixed on the road.

Ianto looked at Jack and raised an eyebrow. "You too?"

"There's a rabbit in my pocket," he admitted.

"You're all as bad as each other," Owen griped. "Don't we have enough with the alien?"

"Apparently not. Just be glad we didn't rescue everything in that shed," Jack said.

"We'd never have fitted them all in the SUV," Ianto mused, almost to himself.

"I give up," Owen muttered, folding his arms across his chest, but he couldn't help smiling. Just because they were fearless alien hunters, it didn't mean they couldn't be softhearted when it came to innocent animals. It was nice to know they all had that in common.

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